

obliged to you, sure. I seen you with my glass from the ridge yonder—and kinder come over this way, you know. You been a pretty good friend to me, Francisca. How're you gittin' along?" he inquired impulsively, and at this sudden sign of interest her breast heaved and she cast her eyes to the ground.

"Oh, I am so 'shamed!" she wailed at last. "I did not mean—I thought—"

"Aw, that's all right," answered Sycamore comfortingly. "I knew old Sam had got around you. But never mind all that— Say, gimme one of them cactus-pears, will you?"

She reached it up to him instantly, and an expert chaperon might have noticed a slight clutching of hands as the desert fruit was exchanged; but Tia was looking away."

TO BE CONCLUDED NEXT WEEK. Don't forget this magazine is issued weekly, and that you will get the conclusion of this story without waiting a month.

"I'm kinder 'shamed, too," confessed Sycamore as he peeled the bright-red pear. "You been mighty good to me, Francisca, and I—well, I sure appreciate it. But I was feelin' powerful mean that day you come down to the line, and—well, I didn't want to see you. I'd do most anythin' for you, Francisca—you jest ask me some time—and, well, I was afeerd if you asked me to come in I'd weaken. Gimme another pear, will you?"

She passed him another *pitahaya*, and as their hands met she gazed at him with eyes so soft and lustrous that there was no longer a secret between them.

"Say," said Sycamore, coming down off his horse, "lemme help you work, will ye?" And while they were behind a mesquit-tree he caught her in his arms and kissed her.

THE WHIRLPOOL

A NOVELETTE

BY ELEANOR M. INGRAM

Author of "Shifting Sands," "Lady Impossible," "His Neighbor's Son," etc.

CHAPTER I.

The Pit of Death.

WHAT?" demanded Miss Howard superciliously. "You should not stand so near the edge," repeated the tall young man opposite her. "And will you be good enough to tell me whom I should ask for work here?"

Miss Howard deliberately changed her position so that one small foot, shod in white silk and suède, actually overhung the brink of the pit beside

her—a huge, cone-shaped pit half filled with crushed stone that moved in a slow whirlpool, constantly emptying itself into the gravel-boats far below, and as constantly filled from the mills above.

The air was filled with the clamor of machinery, the ground trembled with it, so that the girl was forced to raise her voice to make her reply audible.

"Of me," she returned arrogantly. "And we do not need any workmen at present."

"The quarries—"

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"Are mine. I am Claire Howard."

"But who has charge of your workmen?"

"I have."

His dark eyes flashed over her slim, straight figure, noting the costly daintiness of her white serge gown, her long white gloves, the broad white hat on which the blue-gray gravel-dust was already leaving its mark, and he smiled.

There was no mistaking the significance of that smile. Vivid wrath and color sparkled into Miss Howard's face; her gray eyes glinted behind their curling lashes.

"Of course, I employ a manager—Mr. Byrnes," she retorted. "But all affairs are under my command. Good morning."

"Thank you. I will see Mr. Byrnes," he answered.

She drew herself up, surveying him from head to foot; appraising his plain, almost shabby, attire, his composed, bronze-hued face, and the steadfast glance she chose to consider insolent.

"There will be no work for you in my quarries," she said.

"Why not?"

"Because I do not like you."

She expected that he would be either crushed or resentful. But he merely shrugged his shoulders, with the slightly wearied patience one accords an unreasonable child.

"Is it necessary that you like all your workmen personally?" he queried.

There was not in the Hudson River valley a worse or more dangerous colony than that of the laborers employed in the Stoneland quarries. Claire Howard was perfectly aware of the fact.

Blind with temper, she swung on her heel to present her back to the impertinent stranger who had presumed to question her imperious will.

She had forgotten her situation. Her high-heeled shoe slipped on a bit of stone; she reeled—her cry of terror mingled with the warning shout of the

man as she fell backward into the maelstrom of the gravel-pit.

The pit, or chute for the gravel and crushed stone, was funnel-shaped. As the stream of rock poured into this great hopper it fed out more slowly, at the command of those loading the boats.

To maintain a foothold on the sloping sides of the big hopper was impossible; to be drawn down the central vent was to be crushed under tons of stone in the scow below.

But the resistless movement was slow. The girl, half-way down the slope, was able to struggle partly erect, throwing back the loosened masses of her red-gold hair and gazing in horror at the gulf that must swallow her.

Her broad white hat had fallen much lower down; even as she looked it was sucked into that dark lip and vanished. It would be crushed below, as she herself would be; youth, beauty, life annihilated under that grim weight.

She clutched desperately at the slipping gravel, tearing her gloves to shreds.

Amid the din and uproar of the place she heard a crash above her. A rattle of falling bits of stone came with a shower of loosened fragments that glided over the surface and disappeared in the hole.

"Look up!" a voice shouted command. "Reach up your hand to me."

She lifted her head and saw the stranger standing on the slope above her, up to his waist in the stone flood that held them both.

"Help me!" she appealed piteously.

"Reach up your hand, quick!"

She saw then that he held the end of a rope fastened to the edge above. But the rope was short, and he could come no lower without releasing it and becoming as helpless as herself.

"Yes—oh, yes!" she panted, stretching her hands to him and struggling frantically to climb.

The rope was too short. He leaned toward her as she reached to him, but

ward separated their hands. Even while they strained to meet the distance between them increased, the dragging gravel drew her down.

"You cannot save me!" she cried, the lovely face she raised to him drawn and colorless. "Go back while you can!"

His answer was unexpected. He let the rope go and flung himself forward, crashing into the mass beside her.

"When I lift you, catch the rope," he directed. Seizing her in his arms, he lifted her toward the dangling rope. The effort forced him deeper and lower.

"You!" the girl gasped, clinging to him—"how will you get back?"

"Now!" he cried, casting her up the slope of the hopper until her outstretched hands grasped the rope.

She was safe while her strength endured. Winding the rope around her wrists, she found such foothold as she could, and looked back.

The man was lower than she had been, nearer the lip of death, but he watched her unflinchingly.

"I signaled—they'll shut off the chute," he called. "Help will come. Hold on!"

"You—you will be killed!" she cried. "What can I do—what—"

"Hold on till somebody comes," he answered, his voice clear above the din.

"Think of something I can do to help you," she begged. "Think!"

He shook his head.

"I am called Stephen Viviani," he said, after a moment. "You might write an account of this to Mr. Ralph Fox, of Fairhills, Virginia, if you will be so good."

With a shuddering sob she looked wildly about her, searching an impossible aid, then wrenched one hand free and unclasped the leather belt she had around her waist.

"Throw me yours!" she exclaimed.

"If you could reach to catch the end, you could climb up here."

"Rather, pull you down."

"No, no! I could fasten it to the rope. Hurry, hurry! Let me try or I will let go."

He hesitated, then ceased his effort to maintain his position and unclasped the belt he wore.

"Remember to hold your rope," he cautioned, and tossed the leather strap fairly into her grasp.

It was not easy to buckle the belts together with one hand, but she accomplished the task.

"Too short," Viviani warned, as she lowered the strap. "But it was bravely tried."

The girl set her teeth in her lip. Her gown was not to be either torn or removed without assistance, fatally fashionable in its clinging lines; her petticoat was of thinnest lawn and lace, without strength. There was nothing to lengthen the improvised rope—nothing. And the man below was dying for her, through her arrogant temper and wilfulness.

Her cry was of inspiration. Viviani looked up, to see her stoop and tear off her shoes. They bounded toward him, coquettish silver buckles gleaming in the light, and mechanically he caught them, staying their flight to the abyss into which he himself must presently carry them.

"Miss Howard!" he cried, amazed.

She straightened herself, in her hand the white stockings, woven of strong silk. Winding the rope about her arm, she tied the lengths of silk to the lengths of leather.

"It will reach now!" she triumphed.

It reached. The end slipped down—down until Viviani's fingers touched it. The girl gave a great sob.

"If I feel that I am pulling you down I shall let go," he said. "Fasten yourself to the rope so that the recoil will not shake you from it."

"There is no time—you will sink lower, out of reach!"

"There is time if you do not waste it."

Because she knew he would be obeyed or refuse help, she complied with trembling haste. Then, and only then, he began to climb.

Frail as the support was, it was enough to enable him to gain on the clutching gravel. He reached the girl's feet, was beside her; abruptly his fingers gripped the rope, and he passed his arm about her as she swayed, half fainting, against him.

"Steady," he urged, his own voice hoarse from effort and strain.

"I am falling!"

"No. I have you safe."

She clung to him, leaning giddily on his breast. Conventionality was forgotten, dignity lost from memory.

"Put your arm over my shoulder," he directed.

Again she obeyed. The reaction was upon her, and she could not have stood alone. Deep in the slipping gravel Viviani stood, the rope wound about his right arm, his left holding Claire Howard to him.

The pins had been shaken from her bright hair, and it lay in rippling masses over them both; her eyes were closed, and her heavy lashes made shadows upon the transparent pallor of her cheeks.

She was as fragrant to hold as a flower, and as passive in his grasp. The man regarded her strangely and somberly, silent as herself.

She was startled back to consciousness by the cessation of all sound. A sudden hush fell where all the roar of machinery and the din of falling stone had been. Only the monotonous movement of the gravel maelstrom continued.

"What is it?" the girl gasped.

"I signaled before I jumped. They have stopped the machinery. Help will be here soon. I have to thank you for saving my life."

"It is you who saved mine!" said she. "If you had not come down to sacrifice yourself for me you would have been in no danger and I would have died."

"If I had not annoyed you, you would not have fallen," he pointed out. She flushed through her pallor, in the first humility of her indulged and petted life.

"You did not annoy me," she said, her voice low. "I was rude and childish. I am sorry."

Shouts sounded above. Viviani caught the first rope that came swinging down and made it fast to the girl's waist.

Before he gave the signal to lift her he knelt in the treacherous gravel and put the white suède shoes he had rescued upon her small, naked feet.

It was two exhausted, disheveled young people who finally stood opposite each other on the platform, surrounded by appalled, silent workmen.

"You will drive home with me?" invited Miss Howard, most conscious, womanlike, of her ragged attire and disordered hair; crimson with embarrassment since danger was ended. "You will not?" as her rescuer shook his head. "I—is there nothing that I can do?"

"Why, yes," said Viviani, with his swift smile. "You might let me ask Mr. Byrnes for work in your quarries."

CHAPTER II.

In the Quarries.

"THE chocolate of *mademoiselle*, and *madame* inquires if *mademoiselle* is visible?"

Claire Howard sat up in the wide, canopied bed, in which she looked very like the legendary sleeping princess, and yawned frankly, stretching her firm white arms above her head.

"Ask auntie to come in, and bring another cup," she lazily directed. "Celine—"

"*Mademoiselle?*"

"You are always flirting with every servant on the place, Celine, and last week I saw Mr. Van Alen kiss you when you brought my gloves downstairs. You have had much expe-

rience—what is the difference between a gentleman and—and a workman?"

The Frenchwoman clasped her hands dramatically, putting her head on one side.

"Ah, *mademoiselle*! But, but—a difference in clothes."

"Yes."

"In—ah, in manner, in grace!"

"Perhaps."

"In—how shall I express? There is a lack of ease, of the grand air, of command."

"Not always," qualified Claire, and sank back on the pillows. "Thank you, Celine. Admit *madame*."

Miss Miriam Lester was a dove-eyed spinster, detailed to chaperon her niece during the absence of Mr. and Mrs. Howard. There was cordial affection in the embrace the two women exchanged.

"My dear, you are well?"

"I cannot imagine why not," Claire returned. "It is two weeks since I fell into that detestable gravel-pit."

Miss Lester shuddered.

"Claire, do not speak of it! That brave fellow who rescued you—how have you rewarded him?"

"He has a position in the quarries, in the engine-room," Claire answered briefly. "That is what he asked, and that is what he got."

"My dear—"

The girl sat up, scarlet from throat to temples.

"Well, I don't know how to reward him," she avowed defiantly. "I, I—he is not like the others! And—he saw me in my bare feet—and I clung to him."

"My dear!"

Claire buried her face in the pillows, and there was a pause.

"I hate him!" she panted. "He never came to ask after me or whether I was ill or well. He just went to Mr. Byrnes and got his 'job.' He is a boor, a savage!"

"My dear, he may have feared to presume."

"Presume?" repeated Claire. "He

doesn't know the word. He treated me like a child."

Miss Lester was silent. After many moments her niece again turned to her, her lovely face still flushed.

"You think I should see him and thank him, Aunt Miriam; that I should try to repay him?"

"Yes, I do," answered the lady of the old school.

"Very well, I will," yielded Claire. "But if I offer him money he will probably strike me. Will you ring for Celine, please?"

The quarries did not keep the same hours as the gray stone house upon the mountain. Stephen Viviani had been long at work before Miss Howard awoke in her violet-and-silver bedroom, played with her food in the pleasant breakfast-room, and finally entered her red-wheeled dog-cart to drive to the domain her father had jestingly left in her charge.

"Viviani?" the manager met her inquiry in his office. "He's the best man we ever had in the engine-room, Miss Howard. I'll send for him."

"No," declined his employer, unusual color in her smooth cheek. "I will go down—alone, thank you."

Cesare Pulci was singing as Claire paused in the shadow of a doorway to observe the scene; high and clear the melody floated above the hissing roar of machinery in the room, the din of splitting stone, the rattle of gravel pouring through the chutes into that pit the girl knew so well—Cesare Pulci, who possessed a charming tenor voice and as villainous a countenance as Sicily ever afforded.

He was very much soiled by his occupation, streaked and grimed with the soft coal he fed to the furnaces, but his song continued—his song and his furtive study of his companion.

"Cesare," the companion called as the other dwelt lovingly on a high note, "more coal over here. There are other hours for singing."

It was Viviani. He spoke in Italian and like a native, but with the

purity of a Florentine as contrasted with the Sicilian or Calabrian dialect most heard among the workmen.

Cesare straightened up to send him a bitter scowl of resentment, and a man knee-deep in powdered stone burst into a laugh.

"Yes, there are other hours," said Cesare. "I can wait for them."

Viviani's expression changed slightly as he glanced from one man to the other. He himself threw open the furnace for the coming shovelful of coal.

"I was not in earnest," he declared carelessly. "Sing, if you will."

"It was nothing," Cesare responded, without apparent emotion. And after closing the round door: "You of a higher class have always your play with us."

"What do you mean by your 'higher class'? Who am I but a man who works beside you?"

Cesare wiped his hands on his blouse, staring at his companion.

"Works beside us? Yes, but what for? *Macché*, we are not fools! People of your stamp do not come here without a reason, and there are men here who would like to know what it is. Suppose we are not all white as lambs—do we like strangers the better for that? For myself I say nothing—I am an honest, poor man—but there are comrades who like this side of the river and have no taste for *that*"—he tilted his head toward the open door, through which could be seen the opposite shore and the distant, somber walls of Sing Sing prison.

Viviani followed the gesture, comprehending perfectly the meaning and the suspicion of himself.

"True enough," he replied, with a shrug. "But if you fancy I am a government spy you are mistaken. What do I care for the reasons which sent some of our friends to work in this quiet place, away from the cities? Suppose I myself—"

"Well?"

"Why should I tell you my private affairs?"

The man wavered, a little shaken. "Very good," he said sullenly. "I bring you an invitation, Viviani—the men would like you to meet them to-night at the house of Domenico Aldi. They have some matters to talk over with you. If you do not care to come, you had better leave the quarries before to-morrow. Either come or go."

It was no less than a command to face the leader of the place for an examination of his intentions and history, or to leave before he was killed. And if he failed to pass the ordeal satisfactorily he would be found in the river next morning or on some desolate path with a slender knife through his heart.

The thing was so readily explained—a misstep on the edge of the cliff, or one of the frequent brawls among the men. But it was only an instant that Cesare had to wait—the instant while Viviani's lashes fell and lifted again.

"I shall come, of course," he answered.

Each turned away to his own work. The girl in the doorway came forward. She had understood, and her color was no longer too bright.

"Mr. Viviani," she summoned.

He turned swiftly. Cesare and the other assistant respectfully saluted their mistress, and Viviani also bared his head as she came toward him.

"Miss Howard," he acknowledged her presence.

Claire looked at him. His dark-blue working-dress was worn with a self-possessed ease at once businesslike and incongruous, the sleeves rolled to his elbows showed a hand and arm whose smooth fineness of line masked the strength of the rippling muscles beneath; his blue-black eyes met hers in a glance of calm equality.

"You look as if you had put on a laborer's clothing for sport," she exclaimed haughtily. "What is the object of this farce, Mr. Viviani, and why are you playing it here in my quarries?"

"It is not a farce, but grim earnest."

he corrected, keeping his tone below the uproar of the machinery. "If you have the least respect for my life you will not let these men hear you speak to me in this manner. Of course, I have no right to dictate to you; I merely state the fact."

"You are not a workman, and you are not an Italian," she persisted.

"You are kind," he said, with biting irony.

"You mean?"

"That with each such speech you lessen my chance of safety. Surely you know the character of your men here and the risk of one who goes among them suspected."

"Then you *are* here for a purpose!" she flashed, angry and terrified.

"I have not said so. I may be hiding from the law, as are so many of these others."

"No!" escaped her impulsively.

His expression darkened strangely and not happily, and he paused before replying.

"The wall of the prison opposite us, Miss Howard, is no more real than the one that stands between yourself and me. Have I your permission to return to my work?"

"I came to thank you for your rescue that day," she said slowly, steadying herself. "My aunt thinks I should offer you some reward?"

"Do you think so?" he demanded.

"No."

His glance warmed and cleared to a singular radiance, almost to a boy's candid pleasure.

"Thank you," he responded simply.

"I had my reward."

"You? How?"

"I held you in my arms," said Stephen Viviani.

Up from the grimy engine-room Claire fled, rose-hued, suffocating with rage and shame—and with some new emotion she did not analyze. Past the astonished Mr. Byrnes she sped without heeding him, ascended her red-wheeled cart, and struck the horse so viciously with her whip that the animal

reared and plunged up the mountain-side in a swirl of gray dust.

The October morning was very calm and clear, apart from the hideous uproar of the quarries. Back and forth across the huge ledge cut in the mountainside moved the swarming laborers, the shouting foremen, the square cars on their little tracks.

They were preparing for the first blasting of the day, when the heavy, deafening explosions should echo like a bombardment for miles around, and tear great masses of stone from the outraged mountain.

There had been occasions when a blast had exploded too soon or had been badly placed; no one liked to think of those times.

But perhaps Viviani, waiting in the engine-room to sound the whistle of recall, mingled with his reverie some cynical wonder as to how much the world should lose if he failed to give the warning and those workers should remain out there among the lighted fuses.

"Until to-night—if you come," reminded Cesare, passing by. "They will be ready to receive you at eight; they will wait until nine."

"I will be there," promised Viviani.

CHAPTER III.

Saved by a Minute.

AT five o'clock that afternoon Mr. Byrnes received a telephone call from his young employer.

"I want to see Rocco Aldi," Claire informed him. "You remember, the man I had cured after he fell from the cliff. Send him up to the house, please."

"The Aldi family are a bad lot, Miss Howard," he remonstrated.

"I know, I know—but send him to me."

"Certainly, Miss Howard."

Miss Howard hung up the receiver. She was dressed for dinner—a dinner at which there were to be several

guests—but it was not of them that she thought as she surveyed herself in a long mirror. The clinging draperies of pale-green satin, the soft luster of pearls, suited her; satisfied, she touched into place a straying curl and went down-stairs to await Rocco Aldi.

It was a swarthy, not unhandsome young Sicilian who was ushered into the drawing-room half an hour later. There was something pantherlike in his unease and watchful alertness; but his black eyes devoured the beauty of the lady who swept toward him, softening as only Italian eyes can.

"Rocco, when you were so dreadfully hurt and the doctor said you must die, I sent to New York for a great surgeon and had you made quite well," Claire opened abruptly. "Will you help me now?"

"For you I would die," he answered with staccato vehemence.

"No, but help me. Tell me, to-night Stephen Viviani is summoned before your father, is he not?"

She turned aside her face from his fixed gaze.

"He comes to our house," was the cautious response.

"Do they—mean him harm?"

"Not unless he comes to deal harm, *signorina*. He told you?"

"No, no! I was in the quarry to-day, and I overheard them talking. Rocco, he saved my life in the gravel-pit two weeks ago. Will you watch him—watch what happens to-night, and tell me of it afterward?"

The Sicilian lowered his head, his breathing quickened.

"*Signorina*, if my father learned of it—"

"He will not learn. And if he did, I have asked you to betray no one."

"It would be death."

"Rocco, I helped you," she reproached.

He received the shot with a swift movement, his swarthy face reddening.

"Good, *signorina*! I will do it! But if my father learns, I shall be punished—once."

Impulsively she held out her hand, almost repentant of her victory. But Rocco bent his lips to the snowy, gemmed fingers, and the bargain was sealed.

"You are going there?" she questioned half fearfully.

"*Signorina*, to the dark path."

That road was well known to the quarries, if not to Claire Howard. The dark path led up and away from the settlement where the houses of the better workmen huddled together and where there were women and children.

Half a mile from any neighbor stood the dull, isolated building known as the house of Domenico Aldi.

In a different grade of society it would have been called a club; ostensibly it was merely the home of Aldi and his three sons.

On the night when Stephen Viviani had been summoned there a full moon added some light to the somber interior.

Lamps fixed to walls cast a yellowish glare over the score of men lounging on chairs or floor, and the faces so shown were not pleasant.

Aldi's eldest son had been telling a long story of the Mafia's vengeance upon a farmer who had betrayed one of the members to the police—a drowning, matter-of-fact tale of remorseless cruelty—but now his voice had died away and left silence.

Cesare Pulci spoke first from his corner by the window.

"Half past eight has struck. He is not coming."

"He has until nine," corrected Rocco Aldi, the youngest brother, who sat cracking nuts with the haft of his knife. "Give him his due at least. How you hate him, my Cesare!"

"Yes."

"Yes? And why? Because he is better looking than you, perhaps? But we are all that, although no beauties!"

A stir of laughter ran around the circle. Cesare's scowl increased to savagery.

"Because he is a spy," he retorted

bitterly. "Because I feel for my comrades, though myself an honest, poor man, and have no wish to see them dragged to a prison. That is why."

This time the murmur was of a different character. Rocco sprang to his feet, his face quivering with anger.

"And I? Have I a love for spies?" he cried. "See you all—prove this man a spy of the government and I the first will do—this." He flung the knife before him with such violence that the point buried itself in the floor and the steel stood vibrating.

"But I wait the proof. Santa Vergine, shall we promise a man until nine o'clock and pass sentence on him at eight? Is that justice?"

All looked to the acknowledged chief in his seat behind a small table.

"He has until nine," stated Aldi, removing his cigarette to speak, and replacing it as a period.

Rocco wrenched his knife from the floor and sat down again to crack nuts.

"He shared his room with me one night when a storm caught me out," he remarked indifferently. "I have no feeling against him—or for him."

"It is a quarter to nine," said a man in the shadow, the owner of a tiny enameled watch. Claire Howard had once missed such a watch after a visit to the quarries without suspecting to what grim use it would come.

No one replied. Cesare pressed his head to the window, listening for the first distant church-bell.

"At last!" he cried suddenly. "Nine—"

A step sounded on the ground outside; some one knocked and immediately pushed the door open.

"Signori," said Viviani, on the threshold, and saluted them.

"It is too late!" protested Cesare, starting up. "Nine has struck. Are we to be played with like children—made to wait this man's pleasure? It is too late!"

Viviani turned his keen eyes that way, a little surprised by the open vehemence of the attack. Without di-

rectly replying, he crossed to where Domenico Aldi sat and laid his watch before him. Two or three men rose to look also, and announced the result to the others:

"One minute—one minute to nine."

"The clocks have struck!" Cesare cried again.

Rocco laughed out from his place.

"Are we children?" he mocked.

"Viviani is here; who cares for a minute more or less?"

"It is time enough," Aldi pronounced, removing his cigarette and nodding curtly to the guest.

Defeated, Cesare sullenly drew back.

"Thank you," Viviani returned.

"That I am late is no fault of mine; an accident detained me. I have hurried."

In fact his breathing was still quickened by the haste with which he had made the long ascent, as all could see as he stood before them, his hair clustered in damp ripples about his forehead in spite of the chill night wind.

"What accident kept you?" Aldi questioned.

"I was told that Mr. Byrnes had sent for me at his house. Fortunately I met him on the road, and he told me it was not so. Some one had sent me a false message; perhaps to keep me from here."

He looked at Cesare, but that honest man was gazing out the window.

"The young *signorina* visited you to-day in the engine-room—not so?"

"Me? She visited the place. And I once saved her life—she spoke to me."

Aldi threw away the stump of his cigarette and proceeded to roll another. He was a dark, strong-featured man, large of frame yet gaunt.

"Come," he said pleasantly, "we are not unreasonable, we others. We know that people are curious to know how we live; and why should we blame them? Admit that you were sent among us to find out and let us drop all pretense. We are satisfied that you

will make a good report of us to whoever sent you—say as much and let us all drink something before we say good night.”

The trap was prettily concealed, but it failed.

“How can I say what is not true?” objected Viviani. “I am not sent here by any one.”

“Then why are you here?”

“I earn my bread like the rest. A man must live.”

“You are not like the rest.”

Viviani shrugged his shoulders and remained silent. He knew very well that every man present was armed; that the house was far removed from assistance, and that most of the circle before him were here because they were wanted by the police of various cities. He was trying each stone before setting foot upon it, knowing there would never be but one misstep.

“You are not like the rest,” Aldi repeated sharply, yet better pleased with the reticence than with a voluble defense.

“No?” was the slow response. “Well, suppose I were the son of honest shopkeepers who had a fancy for educating their child pretty well, and maybe spoiling him—who knows? Would that account for a difference? And suppose the education gave him extravagant tastes he could not satisfy honestly—might he not arrive here, choosing this to a worse place? Was never a story like that before?”

The impression was distinctly favorable. Nods and glances passed between the listeners. Many a family had such a prodigal son. Aldi assented reflectively.

“Few who are here planned to come,” he commented. “So you are called Viviani? Where were you born?”

“I have lived in Florence,” was the short answer. His restiveness under examination was just enough to show natural caution without a hint of fear.

“Ask him for proof of all this,” cut in Cesare viciously.

For the first time Viviani broke his nonchalant composure, facing that way with a sudden fire contagious as a leaping spark.

“Proof?” he echoed, his flexible voice running all the gamut of contempt and indignation. “Proof? Which of you spreads his whole life out here for all to see? Which of you puts his safety in the hands of other men? Can you prove that you are ‘honest Cesare Pulci’?”

“You call me a spy and think me a detective—how do I know which of you may be that? I have told enough, and too much. I am one and you are twenty—if you do not like this you may do what you choose.”

Turning, he walked to a vacant chair near the wall and flung himself into it, proceeding to roll a cigarette.

The daring audacity won. Every one present, except Cesare, joined in the movement of applause.

“He is right!” exclaimed one of Rocco’s brothers. “It is enough. Shall we fight Cesare Pulci’s quarrel?”

“He is a brave,” growled a scarred veteran. “If we were in the Sardinian hills—he and I—he would be a captain.”

Aldi raised his hand to regain command of the situation.

“I am content,” he declared with dignity. “We take Viviani’s word. The one who uses against him what has been said shall be held to have broken faith with us all. If Viviani breaks his faith to us, he knows what will follow. We are comrades.”

Viviani rose with the others. In the moment of victory he had changed color for the first time, paling so markedly that only the uncertain light saved him from comment.

His face was very grave as he silently clasped hands with the men who came forward one after another. But when Cesare Pulci advanced, Viviani put his hands behind him.

“No,” he said definitely. Cesare retreated, saying nothing. The men exchanged amused smiles.

not ill-pleased with a vindictiveness kin to their own.

Rocco crossed over to the newcomer and took a place beside him as the company settled back to the usual evening occupation of chatting and smoking, varied by mugs drawn from the keg in one corner.

"You would not shake hands with Cesare because you mean him no good," remarked Rocco when the general attention was distracted from them. "You do, then, mean the pledge to the rest of us?"

Viviani moved to look at him.

"If I did not, would I admit it?" he asked lightly. "But I take no pledges carelessly. As for Cesare, I will treat him justly."

"You are a gentle girl!" the other laughed derisively. "But what do I care for sulky Cesare Pulci? I am no spoilsport—not I! Shall I tell you what I think of you, Viviani?"

"If you like."

"Then, you are the son of no poor shopkeeper. I once lived on the estate of Count Contarino Contarini—I can tell a peasant from a gentleman, I! And when you looked at our Cesare, I saw something else: you have a fine, deadly temper, *signor mio*. If you are in hiding it is because you killed some one who offended you."

Viviani's lashes fell swiftly; all his self-control could not conceal the shadow that swept his expression. Rocco laughed again.

"Oh, I ask nothing. I myself might have been a respectable man of family but for a quick temper and a quicker hand."

"When I was sixteen years of age I fell in love with a maid in Palermo. There was an older man she preferred; one day I happened to quarrel with him on the edge of a cliff, and he went over. I had to leave for New York."

"There I found friends. When I was twenty I was in love with Rosina. We were engaged. I worked and was an honest man—all was honey and roses. One evening I came home early

and saw my Rosina kissing another man through the window where I used to serenade her.

"Once more I went blind and struck. *That* for women!" he shook two fingers scornfully in the air. "Poor Rosina, she got neither of us! Since then I stay here. I have shocked you?"

"I am not easily shocked," said Viviani.

"Truly I believe you. But mind yourself among us—I speak as a friend."

"You have been a friend to me to-night; I wonder why?"

"Have I?" asked Rocco dryly. "Well, then, I am in love again—but not with a woman—with a star up there in the sky."

It was a wild, lawless conversation that was carried on, and to which the guest listened attentively. Not that the men planned or seemed to desire new crimes—they spoke of others or of the past.

By and by Viviani was drawn into speech. He had told them only one tangible fact, and upon that they tested his truthfulness.

Only a man who knew the city of Florence very well indeed could have answered all their questions concerning obscure streets and buildings.

The room was heavy with tobacco smoke, the fumes of beer, and the odor of smoky lamps. The patch of pure, chill moonlight on the stained floor was as strange a visitor as the clear-cut face of Viviani among the coarsely dangerous group of men that was around him.

It was not long—perhaps an hour—before the gathering broke up. Released, Viviani passed out into the jet-and-silver night with the weariness of one who has just fought a prolonged duel.

"I have learned something of you," said Rocco's voice beside him.

"We think we watch you, but it is you who watch us. You are seeking something on the lips of each man

who speaks. Oh, I will not tell any one yet. If you will, let us be friends."

CHAPTER IV.

The Witness.

IT was after midnight when Rocco Aldi came to the veranda of the gray-stone house to make his report.

Claire was waiting for him. She had kept her drowsy and wondering aunt from bed to act as unconscious chaperon to the interview.

Rocco refused to enter, so, wrapped in a white cloak, she leaned on the veranda rail and listened to the brief account.

It was a mild and expurgated account that the Sicilian gave her, but it was enough to fix Claire's resolution. When Rocco left her she went to the telephone with truly royal disregard of the hour.

"Mr. Byrnes?" she asked when her call was answered.

"Yes, Miss Howard; what is wrong?" her manager's sleepy voice responded anxiously.

"Nothing is wrong, it is only one o'clock! Will you be kind enough to send Mr. Viviani to me before he starts work to-morrow morning?"

"Who?"

She bit her lip.

"Viviani, your engineer."

"You want him?"

"I want to discharge him," she snapped, and hung up the receiver. "Aunt Miriam, come to bed."

Startled from her nap, the older lady meekly arose.

"Yes, dear," she sighed, with the household submission to its youngest daughter.

With little sound between a laugh and a sob, Claire kissed her aunt.

"Why don't you box my ears when I speak to you like that?" she scolded. "Is it any wonder I am spoiled unbearably? Oh, why didn't you all box my ears sometimes when I was a little girl?"

It was late when Claire fell asleep, and early next morning Celine came to awaken her mistress two hours before the usual time.

"*Mademoiselle* gave orders that she should be told when a workman arrived to see her."

Claire opened incredulous gray eyes, moving her copper-gold head on the pillow.

"Already?" she marveled. "When do men get up?"

"*Mademoiselle*, it is a quarter to eight."

Claire groaned resignedly.

"Dress me," she submitted.

Viviani was waiting on the broad veranda when she appeared. Manifest impatience knitted his dark brows—he rose to meet her with the alacrity of one waiting to be gone.

"You sent for me, Miss Howard?" he greeted, a trifle brusquely. "My work is waiting for me, and my absence will be noted."

She raised her eyebrows, seating herself in an armchair.

"Yes," she answered coldly. "You may consider yourself discharged from my employ."

Staggered, he stared at her. If she had wished to move him she had succeeded.

"Why?" he demanded. "In what am I at fault?"

"I have found no fault."

"Then—"

"I know where you were last night," she stated deliberately. "I am discharging you because my quarries are not safe for you, and you are too obstinate to go away of yourself. It is for your own good."

Viviani flung back his head, and for the first time she heard him laugh outright.

"You will make some man a dictatorial wife, Miss Howard! If this is all I will thank you for your interest—please believe me sincerely grateful—and return to my work."

She sprang up, furious, the scarlet flags of war in her cheeks.

"You will not take your dismissal?" she cried. "You dare contradict me?" He caught the little hands she had involuntarily flung out, coming close to her.

"Do you think," he asked very quietly, "that you can dictate to me?"

Like two beautiful wild creatures they faced each other, their flashing eyes encountering. Claire's fell first, mastered.

"Let me go!" she panted.

"I have no right to do anything else," he answered, and released her hands.

She sank into her chair, and there was a silence.

"If you dismiss me," he said presently, "I shall still stay among these men. Instead of helping me, you will have made my task ten times more difficult."

"But if I knew it to be impossible—if I knew my death and failure were certain—I would still have no choice but to go on. For the shadow of such a hope as I gained last night I would give my life ten times if it were possible."

"You have much to learn, Miss Howard; you cannot snatch the reins from the hands of men and drive them where you choose. Have I your permission to return to my work?"

"I hate you!" she blazed.

He regarded her fixedly with a weary patience.

"No," he disagreed. "But I have no right to tell you how you do feel toward me—I may never have."

Unnoticed, a carriage had swung into the drive beyond and stopped. As Viviani turned away he came face to face with a small, stately old gentleman who descended from the vehicle. Both halted as if struck.

"Fairfax!" the older man exclaimed, recoiling with amazed repugnance. "Fairfax!"

Viviani gave the other level glance for glance, then bowed and moved on down the path to the quarries.

Claire swayed forward, mechanically

bent upon welcoming her guest, feeling every nerve in her young body tense.

"Colonel!" she greeted hysterically. "This is delightful of you! But—you know Viviani?"

"Viviani?" he echoed, pausing in the act of bowing over her hand. "My dear Miss Howard, that man is Stephen Hamilton Fairfax, who killed his brother in a jealous rage five years ago."

"He was tried for it, and finally acquitted by a sentimental jury."

"If he had not been the last of a fine old family, I believe the people would have lynched him. What is he doing here?"

There was a wide settee behind Claire. Upon it she sank, while the bright morning blackened before her eyes.

"He is—he works in the quarries," she articulated faintly. "He—saved my life once!"

It was Miss Lester who rescued the situation, issuing from the house to welcome the old friend of the family.

And Claire gained time to recover her composure.

Alone in her room, she fought the question to a conclusion. An assassin, a fratricide—that man who had accepted death to give life to a strange girl? The man who had held her in his arms, whose blue-black eyes had mastered hers?

She would not believe it—she could not. Yet, why was he living with criminals in hiding from the world to which he obviously belonged?

After luncheon, when she was seated in the library with her guest on the opposite side of the fireplace, Claire nerved herself to put the question at her heart. For it was at her heart; quite suddenly that knowledge had come to her, to her infinite dismay and self-scorn. She had seen Viviani three times, and he had laid hands upon her life.

"Colonel Cary, will you tell me what you know of Mr. Fairfax?" she asked, holding her voice to cool composure.

The old gentleman frowned at the fire, knitting his bushy white brows.

"It is for your protection to know, my dear young lady," he reluctantly admitted. "But I regret it."

"Stephen and Louis Fairfax were the sons of my lifelong friend, Judge Fairfax, of Fairhills. Both young men were in love with their cousin, Lucy, and she finally engaged herself to the younger, Stephen. Why the lovers kept their engagement secret I do not know, but they chose to do so."

"Just at this time Stephen was sent to Brazil by his father on business connected with their coffee plantations. He went without complaint; in fact, he had the gayest and most generous disposition; no one could have guessed his dormant nature."

"He was gone six months, and returned unexpectedly one June day. He found the house crowded with guests, and Lucy in bridal white. An hour before she had been married to his brother. His ship had crossed the one carrying him news of the wedding."

Claire uttered a low exclamation, her beautiful eyes dark with indignation.

"Yes, it was hard on him," the colonel conceded. "But—he was a gentleman—or, at least, he should have been a gentleman. He confronted his father and Lucy, and there was a wild scene of explanation."

"The girl confessed that she had never told of her betrothal to Stephen, fearing to lose Louis, whom she really loved, and who had wooed her in all innocence of the treachery. She had written to Stephen, and counted on his well-known generosity for her forgiveness."

"Stephen seemed to listen, then demanded his brother, whom he had not yet seen. He was told that Louis was in the park, where he had gone on some errand. Stephen rushed from the house alone in search of him."

"Well?"

"Ten minutes later Stephen was found by those who followed, kneeling

beside his dead brother. Louis had been stabbed with a pruning-knife that a gardener had left beside the tree under which they had met."

Shuddering, Claire covered her face. "What did he say?" she asked after many moments.

"He denied guilt. He said Louis was dead when he found him. He swore to that absurd lie—and lost even the friends who might have pitied him if he had honestly confessed the moment's insanity."

"But it is hard to hang a white man in the South, and he went free. His father died three months later, literally of a broken heart. He would not see Stephen again, but he left him all the family wealth."

"I cannot imagine why he is in this place, although, of course, he had to leave Virginia and take his disgrace elsewhere."

"The girl, Lucy?"

"She married again a year afterward."

The fire crackled on the hearth, a clock above their heads tinkled and chimed three o'clock. After a while Claire rose and crossed to the telephone-table.

"Mr. Byrnes? Call Viviani to the phone, please."

Colonel Cary started and raised his head, studying the straight, graceful figure at the telephone.

"Mr. Viviani? This is Miss Howard. I wish to say that I spoke thoughtlessly this morning. I hope you will continue at the quarries as long as suits your plans. And if I can be of service to you at any time, pray call upon me."

"Miss Howard!" the colonel protested, bounding to his feet.

She dropped the receiver, facing him with her bright head held high and her eyes alight, never more mistress of herself.

"Colonel, you are mistaken. Either Stephen Viviani is not Stephen Fairfax, or—"

"But I know him!" he cried.

"Then Stephen Fairfax is innocent."

"But—"
She smiled at him, superb in steadfastness, above logic.

CHAPTER V.

The Cost of Honor.

A WEEK passed, but Viviani did not again see his employer or claim the aid she had offered.

It was a dull week at the gray stone house where Claire Howard and her aunt still entertained their guest. Rocco Aldi brought one more report to the girl, merely stating that Viviani was with the men every evening at the house of Aldi, and that he was well liked by all except Cesare Pulci.

Many an evening Claire would imagine that scene; again and again in fancy she followed one figure across the ledgelike road on the face of the cliff, seeing lurking shadows rise and follow also.

Again and again she passed into the somber house whose exterior she had glimpsed from the river below—a house so near the blasting-fields that it was built with mere slits of windows and doors to withstand the flying showers of stones—and, entering, saw Viviani's clear, chill face ringed round by Aldi's sullen men.

The book would slip from her fingers, her head would droop under its weight of copper-gold floss; then a voice or touch would arouse her, and she would look up to laugh or chat with forced gaiety.

The eighth day was cloudy and cold. During the late afternoon a freezing rain began to fall, and a November storm closed in upon the countryside.

Claire was descending the stairs before dinner, when the butler approached her with his card-tray.

"There is a workman here who insisted upon my bringing his name to you, Miss Howard," he ventured doubtfully.

With a little gasp she caught from the proffered tray a bit of paper—card

by courtesy—across which ran two words in a writing singularly fine and clear: "Stephen Viviani."

In spite of her haste, she paused an instant before a long mirror. A slim, wide-eyed girl confronted her in the snowy luster of satin and lace, the frosty gleam of her favorite pearls; a girl crowned by the ribbon-bound masses of bright hair and flushed by excitement.

The reception-hall where Viviani waited was a medieval affair, strewn with fur rugs and cheered by a huge fireplace. Before the hearth he was standing when Claire descended the stairs.

"I tried to come quickly," she said, with less than her usual assurance. "I fancied you might want some help I could give."

In all his anxiety and preoccupation Viviani paused to gaze at the delicate beauty of snow and gold she presented. And she was sharply struck by his poor attire in contrast with the luxurious hall and by the locked fatigue of his expression.

"I do want help," he answered gravely. "The work of years concludes. I must reach the village, and soon."

"I cannot go around the cliff and through the quarries without being seen and betraying myself. Moreover, the miles of walking and climbing would take time."

"Will you lend me your automobile for an hour or two? If not, I must take a canoe and make the trip by river."

"A canoe in this storm! Oh, no, no! Take the car, certainly. Come!"

She caught up her skirts and led the way through a covered passage to the tiled, electric-lighted garage. Two cars stood side by side on the shining floor, and from between them advanced the chauffeur.

"Williams, Mr. Viviani is going to take out the roadster," Claire announced. "Make it ready, please."

The man stared from his mistress

to the engineer of the quarry with all the professional's jealousy of his mechanical toys.

"It is always ready," he answered sulkily. "But it's a sixty-horse-power car and the roads are wet. Mr. Viviani will need to be careful."

"Mr. Viviani is used to driving," Claire stated haughtily. She did not know whether Viviani had ever touched an automobile in his life, but she was perfectly willing to leave that matter to him. "Open the doors."

"What can I say to thank you?" Viviani asked, as the chauffeur went to obey. "Of all the world, you are the only one I would ask for help—and the only one who would give it to me."

There was a quality in his voice that stirred her deeply. She found no reply, nor could she look up until he turned to the car. Then a blast of rain and wind swept through the open doors and recalled her.

"Wait!" she commanded, starting forward. "You would go like that in November? Williams, your heavy coat and gloves at once."

"Miss Howard!" protested both men together.

"Yes," she said imperiously — "at once!"

To her complete dismay, excitement culminated in a rush of emotion that broke her voice and blurred her vision with tears. She had an indistinct impression of Williams bringing the desired garments, of Viviani's face brilliant with his rare smile — then there was the rush of the great car, and she and the chauffeur stood alone in the garage.

"You'll recollect I'm not to blame, miss," observed Williams with gloomy satisfaction. "The roads are steep, rocky, and no wider than a ribbon; with cliffs first on one side and then on the other, and the sleet blowing real nasty. There'll be an accident, sure."

Claire turned and fled back to the house.

Dinner was served and eaten, coffee was served in the drawing-room and

removed. Afterward Claire played bits of Greig and Chaminade for the two older people, with fingers that shook on the piano-keys. What had happened to send Viviani on that wild journey—what was happening at that moment?

When at last Claire saw through a window the glaring lights of the returning car she sprang to her feet, stammering an incoherent excuse, and fairly ran from the room.

Into the dimly lighted garage she sped, in time to see Viviani step from the automobile as the automatic doors of the building swung shut after his passage.

She paused, watching while he cast off the dripping coat and cap. But when he leaned against the wheel in a movement of utter weariness she started forward.

"You are ill? Oh, it was too much—too long!"

Viviani sprang up to meet her, his face flashing into the radiance she had seen once before.

"You here?" he exclaimed. "You, Claire?"

Her name on his lips, something in her expression as she halted opposite him, and the high tension of the last hours for both—before one or all the chain of convention snapped.

With a movement almost fierce he caught her to him, bending his head above the golden head that sank so passively against his shoulder.

"I love you!" he said with curt passion. "God, how I love you!"

The silence was long. After a time Claire ventured to look up into the dark eyes, and, dazzled by what she found there, veiled her own as he stooped to kiss her.

"I have no right to do this," he said, his voice strained. "But I may have—Claire, I may have!"

"I know," she whispered.

"Colonel Cary—"

"He told me."

"Yet you let me touch you?"

She drew back a step, leaving her hands in his.

"Stephen, you do not need to tell me you did not do that thing."

He went to his knee on the garage floor and hid his eyes against her hands.

"The first time," he said brokenly, "my love—my love, the first time that has been said to me in all the years! Father, friends, the woman who betrayed me—not one but believed me guilty. And you, without hearing me, without even my word—"

"I know you."

He rose, and they looked quietly into each other's eyes, her hands on his shoulders.

"I am not guilty. But if I had been, Claire, the last five years would almost have been punishment enough. I have lived through hell.

"I have had just one hope, faint enough until I came here to your quarries—the hope of finding the real criminal. I have poured out my fortune, I have spent youth and life in that search.

"And to-night it ends."

Before she could answer a whistle sounded outside. As they turned a white face showed against the dark square of the nearest window. Startled, Claire cried out; but Viviani sprang to the door and opened it, stepping out.

"Viviani!" greeted a somber voice; a dark figure rose from the shrubbery and seized his arm. "Santa Vergine, how long it has been! You here, the *signorina* in your arms— They are right then—you are what they say!"

"Rocco?"

"Rocco, yes. Rocco Aldi, who trusted you. Do you know what they call you, down there, to-night? Viviani, I said that if ever you tricked us, I myself would kill you. I lied—do you hear me? I lied.

"I have my knife here and you are unarmed; like a fool, I have told you what will send me to worse than prison, yet I cannot strike. I lied." Something glinted in the ray of light from within, as he flung it to the ground.

"I am a child, but I cannot touch you. Now escape from here. The first time they find you, you will die."

"Stephen!" panted Claire, aghast.

Viviani did not heed, all his attention fixed on the young Sicilian who held his arm in a grip that bruised.

"Rocco, I hunted Cesare Pulci," he declared. "On my faith and honor, I am innocent of any action against the rest. You say rightly that I am unarmed. Take up your knife, and if what I say is not true, I give you permission to use it."

"You mean—"

Viviani stepped back into the beam of yellow light, drawing the other with him.

"Look at me, Rocco," he bade, and turned his steady face to the scrutiny.

Rocco looked, and looked again; then, sighing with relief, his face relaxed and he stooped to recover the weapon.

"I was sick of the world!" he declared. "Two hours I have waited here to warn you. Down there they are raging, furious. Where will you go—New York?"

"I am going back with you," said Viviani.

"To the quarries?" he cried. "I tell you the story is out; they have passed the word of *traditore*! Cesare Pulci followed you to-day and saw you take the *signorina's* automobile. He told my father, and you were watched.

"We have friends down in the town; they used the telephone in the river saloon. They know there were police waiting down there, and that you went to them. They know the roads are watched, the river stations, the trains—they know the police are on their way here now. They believe you have betrayed all you heard among us, that we are all trapped. Cesare Pulci tells them you are a detective."

Viviani's brows contracted in his cold anger.

"One more debt to Cesare Pulci," he commented, and turned to the girl. "Claire, have you understood this?"

"Yes, Stephen."

He took her hands once more, his face gentler than she had ever seen it.

"Dear, if I come back, it will be with a cleared name to offer my wife. But if not, whatever happens, wherever I may be, I shall carry my love for you."

"But where are you going?" she cried piteously. "Stephen, where are you going?"

"Honor has its costs," he answered. "I am going to the house of Domenico Aldi."

Stunned, Claire shrank back. Viviani uttered a rapid sentence in Italian, and hurried his companion into the desolate road. With a rush of rain and wind, the storm closed behind them.

Colonel Cary and Miss Lester were playing chess when Claire came into the room and halted opposite them, a white statue of resolution—her eyes a gray fire in her colorless face. Astonished, her two elders rose.

"Colonel, you are a man and will command more attention than I," the girl said clearly. "Telephone to the police office in the village that they must close in upon the quarries at once!"

"Tell them that the men have taken alarm and are up, and that Stephen Fairfax has gone alone to the house of Domenico Aldi. I have sent for Mr. Byrnes."

"Claire!" faltered her aunt.

Claire's eyes did not leave the old gentleman's face.

"Colonel, will you act, or must I?" she demanded. "I tell you they will kill Mr. Fairfax."

"And what, Miss Howard, has Fairfax to do with you?" challenged the colonel stiffly.

"He is the man I am going to marry!"

"Never!" almost shouted the old soldier, striking his hand upon the back of the chair from which he had risen. "Before Heaven, young lady, I would shoot Fairfax myself before

I would see Jim Howard's daughter marry disgrace and infamy! That man, that man—"

"The man who has proved himself innocent in spite of his friends—and who may die to-night to buy that proof!" said she.

"Colonel Cary, the man who murdered Louis Fairfax has been found, and he is *not* Stephen."

She turned to the telephone, but before she could use it the colonel had taken the instrument from her unsteady hands.

"I gave Stephen his first riding lesson, twenty years ago," he said, his voice oddly dry and old. "Allow me."

CHAPTER VI.

The Red Mark.

THE storm was at its worst, snarling along the bare ledge of the cliff like a wild beast.

Around the lonely house of Domenico Aldi swept the malevolent howl of the gale, the roar of the river below, and the crackle of frozen rain against the rocks.

Within the shut walls one lamp had succumbed to the penetrating drafts, and two men were endeavoring to relight it under the impatient directions of a companion who knelt on the floor.

"More to the right! Have we a thousand years to spend here at our ease? Now hold it here—look, comrades!"

They were not a pleasant sight, the score of men who gathered around. Their swarthy faces were disfigured by rage and desperate anxiety; the heavy shadows playing back and forth were no darker than the transient thoughts expressed on lips or brows.

"This is the road—this is the river," the kneeling man sketched his map in the dust. "Here the mountain is too steep; this way will be watched. This road passes the great house; Viviani—"

A fierce tremor ran through the group, interrupting him—a drawing of breath like a hiss.

"The traitor; call him that," bade Aldi softly from his seat behind the table.

The first speaker expressively wiped his mouth on his sleeve, as if to cleanse the stain of the name.

"Rocco has not come back," suggested one man significantly. "Perhaps he has luck. For his chance I would give a finger! To strike, and strike!"

"To have him in my hills!" the Sardinian longed, his hands working. "We did not finish with spies in one hour, or two; the sport lasted."

"Meanwhile, the police come," reminded Cesare Pulci sharply. "Will you find Viviani, comrades? Will you remember?"

Glances of comprehension were exchanged and unspoken menace.

"Sooner or later, now or another time; we do not forget," said Aldi. "Have patience."

The door opened so noiselessly that a blast of wet wind first called attention. The movement of all as they turned was of defense, and the faint ring of steel greeted Rocco and his companion.

The first instant was of amazement, then the rush came.

"Stand back!" Rocco shouted, flinging himself before the torrent. "Stand back—he came himself. Listen!"

"Treachery!" soared Cesare Pulci's cry above the rest. "There are more out there."

"He is alone," Rocco protested fiercely.

"Wait," commanded Aldi out of his chair.

But it was Viviani's own cool voice which checked the grim intent.

"There is time. Suppose you hear me first? Twenty to one—you are safe."

There was a pause of doubt. A man sprang to the door to reconnoiter.

"No one else," he proclaimed. "The trial, the trial!"

The crowd reluctantly surged back, carrying Rocco in the press and leaving Viviani before Aldi's table.

In the brief, savage *mêlée* some one had bound a scarf around the captive's wrists, securing his arms behind him.

So bound, Viviani faced the judges who quivered to become executioners; for all his courage, a trifle paler after feeling death brush past him.

"Traitor!" repeated Cesare Pulci, the vicious word saying all.

"That is a lie," Viviani retorted promptly. "Would I have come here, without even a weapon, if that had been so? A lie!" as the room broke into murmurs.

"Rocco brought you," a voice called.

"I did not," Rocco denied. "He was coming here of his own choice. It is Cesare who lies—Viviani is true."

A storm of derision broke out.

"And the police?"

"He was seen in town!"

"Death!"

Aldi's lifted hand brought a lull. Rising, he leaned across the table to bring his face nearer the prisoner.

"Can you deny that you came among us for purposes of your own—that you know the Signorina Howard as an equal, and used her automobile to visit the police and give information against us?"

"Can you deny that you are not a workman nor a refugee from the law? Are these things lies?"

"Some are true, some are not," Viviani answered, his eyes not flinching from those opposite. "But I am not what Cesare Pulci called me, and I have not betrayed your trust."

A man laughed in the rear of the room. Aldi sat down, looking around as he made a strange, rapid sign with two fingers, as if drawing a character on the blank air.

"We want more than just words," he said. "Show the accused that we are in earnest, my brothers."

Two men stepped behind and laid their hands on Viviani's shoulders; one of them Rocco.

"Keep quiet; they will not harm you yet," he breathed, affecting to tighten the bound wrists. "They can wait."

Viviani's white teeth pressed his lip. He knew into what snare his hunt had led him; knew that if he escaped these men now without satisfying them it would only be to meet death later from some branch of their vast and evil society. He stood without resistance, immovable.

A third man had come forward and deliberately proceeded to unbutton the prisoner's flannel outing-shirt, pushing aside the folds above his heart. All disorder had ceased at Aldi's signal; when Viviani abruptly started, every one present saw the quiver pass over him.

"You are afraid now?" demanded Aldi.

"No—cold," he answered, smiling frankly as he nodded to the fold of sleet-soaked flannel that had fallen against his chest.

The incident was nothing, but somehow its naturalness sent a change through the atmosphere. Involuntarily a smile went around, and the tension lessened. Aldi himself hesitated, taking up a fragment of red chalk.

"Do you know what this means?" he asked, and drew a letter T on the surface of the table.

"Yes," Viviani answered, eying Aldi steadily. He had seen a man carried home with those two deep cuts above his heart.

"If with this chalk I set that mark upon you, no water can wash off the meaning it leaves." To-night or to-morrow, next week or next year, by us or our comrades it will be rewritten with steel. Yet it would be better to accept that now than to deceive us. Shall I write?"

"I have not earned it."

"Good; I wait." Aldi laid the chalk

on the table. "Speak; the chance will never return."

Viviani drew a long breath. There was no need to tell him that this was the last chance of defense, of life with Claire, and happiness with honor restored.

"Very well, I will speak," he assented. "But since this is a trial, and a trial for life, give me the privilege of a court, and hear me to the end. Is that granted?"

"It is granted," assured Aldi, infected by the other's poise and dignity. At his gesture the guards stood back from the captive.

"Thank you. Then, first, I have not betrayed you in any way; almost everything else you say is true.

"I am not one of you; I am not an Italian, and I came among you for an object of my own. You can all understand a hate—I followed one man here, not many.

"Until six years ago I had never passed an unhappy day. I had an honorable name, a father, and a brother. My brother was two years older than I, and I loved him as one man rarely loves another. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, I could not have given up to him, nothing he could have done to me that I would not have forgiven.

"When I was twenty-three we were separated for the first time. I went to South America. The day I came home I found him at the foot of our garden dead, in a pool of his own blood."

No one stirred to interrupt. One of the lamps had again blown out, but no one moved to relight it. After a moment Viviani raised his head abruptly, his eyes holding the blue flash of steel.

"That was not all that June morning brought to me. In my absence my brother had unknowingly wronged me—it does not matter how. There had been bitter words spoken; they were remembered, and I was accused of killing him.

"I was disgraced, cast out by honest men; my father refused to see me before he died of our dishonor.

"You threaten me!" With an effort of sheer strength he wrenched in half the binding scarf and flung the fragments aside.

"If I had known my search for the murderer was to end to-night I would not have delayed it one hour. If there had been no other way to reach the man I have hunted for five years I would have shot him myself and paid the penalty.

"If you kill me now, still I have my victory, for he cannot escape the net around him. Which of your laws forbid the vendetta? Try me by them, if they exist; I have broken no others."

His fiery energy had leaped through the veins of all. Sympathy, relief, faith in personal safety pulsed in the tense faces. The two guards did not recapture their self-freed prisoner.

"Is that all?" asked Aldi, keeping outward stolidity.

"All?" Viviani echoed. "What more do you want? I have injured no one here. Among you I have found my man, and having found him, I take. That is all, yes. Now write, if you choose!"

Every one present pressed forward; a storm of protest and encouragement broke out, violent as the condemnation had been.

"And the man?" Aldi cried above the excitement. "Who is the man?"

"When I shook hands with you all I refused the man I suspected. To-day I secured the last proof. Cesare Pulci, I am Stephen Fairfax."

All looked from the crouching man in the corner to the erect, fearless figure in the middle of the room. Viviani's acquittal was in the eager tumult that drowned Aldi's voice.

"He is a brave; he is worthy of Sardinia!" rang the veteran's cry. "No sentence!"

For a moment the sinister faces turned to Viviani with cordial liking and approval, hands were extended, and lips smiled. He leaned to meet them when windows and door crashed open.

"Stand as you are!" pealed a shout. "You're all covered. Stand, I say!"

The crowd halted and fell blindly back. Even Viviani, taken by surprise, lost a wordless instant.

"Drop the knives!" shouted the voice again. "We've got the lot all right! Come out, Mr. Fairfax; they'll do you mischief."

The warning came too late. From his corner Cesare Pulci leaped, throwing down the one lamp as he passed.

"Treachery!" he screamed furiously. "Now who tricked you—who lied?"

The place burst into uproar.

"Rush them!" cried the police officer in keen anxiety. "Lights, lights! Fairfax!"

"No firing," rang Viviani's clear command through the darkness. "Touch no one but Pulci. Hold your fire."

Oaths, cries in mingling languages, struggling and the stamp of feet died into gasping silence as the men with lanterns ran up. Overpowered and surprised, Aldi's men remained in the hands of their enemies after a battle almost bloodless. But one man lay on the floor, and another knelt beside him.

"Mr. Fairfax?" panted the officer, wiping the rain from his eyes. "You're safe?"

"Be quiet and bring more lights," the order cut him short. "Rocco, Rocco, why did you not let me take my own chance?"

"My whim," came the difficult answer. "Cesare did this; no fault of yours, Viviani."

It was Claire Howard who brought the light, an incongruous figure in her rich furs, the small white hand that held the lantern gleaming with jewels.

Stephen Fairfax supported Rocco's head upon his knee, bending his face to meet the young Sicilian's eyes and heedless of the spreading crimson stain on his own sleeve.

"Cesare—no, let me speak; it is all but over. *Macché*, I always expected to die by the knife—I am glad to have

saved you in the going! Lift me higher."

The man who had been Viviani obeyed tenderly. Rocco raised himself on the supporting arm and lifted his hand in the swift, curious gesture Aldi had used, looking around the circle.

"Witness all — Pulci, not Viviani, did this. I stepped between."

"Hush, and rest," Fairfax implored. "Think of yourself, not me."

"Is there no surgeon, no priest?" Claire whispered in horrified pity.

"Not for miles. Rocco, can I do nothing?"

"Stay with me—it will not be long," He turned his dimming eyes upon Claire. "Perhaps it is as well to stop now—I have wished I had kept cleaner since I knew you and the *signorina*. *Altro*—it darkens! They called you traitor; fix that while I can see."

"Randall, if you have charge of this blunder, take notice that you have warrant to arrest no one but Cesare Pulci," Fairfax said without moving. "There is no charge against the other men."

"But they would have killed you!" exclaimed the officer.

"You have no proof of that. I accuse no one but Pulci. Set the rest free."

"They fought—"

"They resisted your attack. Set them free!"

Slowly and reluctantly Randall gave the word and his men fell back from their prisoners.

"You spoke the truth," said Rocco faintly. And after a moment: "I touched the star—*signorina*—"

Claire stooped down and touched her fresh, girl's lips to the forehead of the man who was dying for her lover.

The room was very quiet when Fairfax rose. The officer had brought a chair for Claire, and she was conquering her tears in silence. From the doorway Colonel Cary advanced, stately in contrition as in condemnation.

"Stephen, we were all wrong. I apologize, sir."

They shook hands mutely, one of them having no words.

"You are wounded, Mr. Fairfax," Mr. Byrnes reminded, advancing in his turn.

Fairfax glanced down indifferently, then pushed up his sleeve and twisted his handkerchief about the cut.

"It is nothing," he said. "Rocco took what was meant for me. It is nothing, Claire," as she sprang up.

"Randall," he turned toward the corner where two men held a handcuffed, disheveled prisoner, "take Cesare Pulci with you; he has been bought with a price. He was a workman on my father's place, and killed my brother on his wedding-day in revenge for a fancied insult."

"You will come home," Claire urged. "You will come home, Stephen?"

Fairfax hesitated, sending a glance over the group of Italians, then crossed to where Domenico Aldi stood.

"May I go?" he asked significantly.

Aldi looked into the blue-black eyes. As he had watched without emotion the death of his youngest son, so now he gave without emotion the decision.

"Yes," he answered, and passed his hand over the red letter T on the surface of the table, obliterating it.

With equal quietness Fairfax drew shut the folds of his shirt over his heart, accepting his acquittal.

Claire was waiting.

On the threshold of the gray-stone house the lovers stopped in their first moment of solitude.

"Claire, the world will believe now, because it must," said Fairfax unsteadily, with the bitterness that could never quite leave him. "But you — you alone gave me faith!"

Her hand touched his; suddenly they were in each other's arms, heedless of the beating storm, his kisses upon her rain-wet face and drenched, copper-gold hair.

(The end.)